

VZCZCXRO0160  
RR RUEHBW RUEHPOD  
DE RUEHPOD #0128/01 1021610  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 111610Z APR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY PODGORICA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0752  
INFO RUEHTI/AMEMBASSY TIRANA 0103  
RUEHVB/AMEMBASSY ZAGREB 0144  
RUEHVJ/AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO 0074  
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BELGRADE 0341  
RUEHPS/AMEMBASSY PRISTINA 0090  
RUEHPOD/AMEMBASSY PODGORICA 0833

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [MW](#)

SUBJECT: CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL ROMA DAY IN MONTENEGRO

REF: STATE 29991

1. SUMMARY: On April 8, International Roma Day, the Embassy organized a roundtable discussion on issues that face the Roma population in Montenegro, which was held in a refugee camp in Podgorica. Ambassador, local and refugee Roma, and representatives of the government and international organizations exchanged views on education, housing, health protection, and other issues of importance for the Roma population. Ambassador also announced that the U.S. Department of Defense has donated 28,000 dollars to help reconstruct roofs in the camp, which provides shelter for 1,500 Roma refugees from Kosovo. The event received positive local press coverage -- and an opposition swipe that the U.S. seems to care more for the Roma than the PM, who did not publicly mark Roma Day. END SUMMARY.

2. With assistance from UNHCR and the Montenegrin Red Cross, the Embassy organized a tour of the Konik refugee camp for visiting DRL officer Dan Nadel. The tour showed the terrible living conditions of local Roma and their accommodations either within the camp or in run-down homes built in illegal settlements.

3. To bring the focus back to the positive contributions of Roma in Montenegro, Post invited a dozen Roma "success stories", running the gamut from a doctor from Kosovo to a scholarship winning law student. Post also invited government representatives from the Bureau for the Care of Refugees and the Coordinator of the office for the Roma Decade as well as representatives of the OSCE Department for Minorities, UNHCR, Montenegrin Red Cross and the Montenegrin Ministry of Minorities. Our first Roma International Visitor participant Fana Delija served as moderator of the roundtable discussion.

4. Many of the successful Roma participants noted that Roma face many problems in Montenegro including education, health care, living conditions, and the position of Roma women within the community. Regarding education, many noted that there is sometimes a language barrier which stifles the success of Romani children. Montenegrin Red Cross representatives added that without a supportive family structure, it is difficult for the schools to instill a strong interest in education in Romani children. A Roma participant acknowledged that the Romani cultural practice of taking children out of school to work, get married or beg for money further complicates the prospect of Roma education.

5. All participants who lived at the refugee camp noted that

medical assistance available there -- two hours every morning -- was insufficient to meet the medical needs of the camp's 1500 residents. A Roma doctor noted that new Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Welfare regulations delineating where people could seek health care prevented her from seeing patients at the camp and in the local health center. She now has a quota of patients she is permitted to receive and she is no longer able to serve patients at the camp. The moderator, who is a member of a local Roma NGO, also noted that Roma from the refugee camp are not permitted to receive health care elsewhere.

¶6. Everyone, including government representatives, acknowledged the deplorable living conditions within the camp. One woman noted that she has been in the camp since 1999, when she was told she would only be there for five years. Nearly ten years later, her large family falls ill frequently because of the leaky roof that covers the barrack they live in. Post was approached by the Montenegrin Red Cross, which manages the camp, in December 2007 to fund a roof replacement project. With funding from the Department of Defense's Humanitarian Assistance Fund, 28,000 dollars has been allocated for this project, which got under way April 7. The Director of the Bureau for the Care of Refugees admitted that camp conditions were not good but said the government was trying to close remaining collective centers and move people to more permanent housing. He added that the government had funded construction of 24 pre-fabricated houses for 180 people in Berane, in northern Montenegro. According to the director, the government also agreed to construct additional pre-fabricated houses in Pljevlja, another northern town, but he did not address the housing needs of those in Podgorica. A Roma participant born in Montenegro noted that local Roma faced the same living conditions as the refugees.

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¶7. Participants noted that the position of women in the Roma community posed a particularly complex problem. The common practice of early marriage coupled with large numbers of children made it difficult for Romani women to pursue educational or work opportunities. Nevertheless, post noted that many of the most active roundtable participants were young women who had managed to achieve great academic success.

¶8. At the conclusion of the event, the Roma participants pushed government representatives for greater implementation of the Roma Decade Action Plan at the local level. The Roma Decade coordinator emphasized that the government allocated 400,000 Euro for implementation of the Action Plan, although 2008 was the first year the program had funding. One Roma NGO participant told PolOff following the roundtable that the Roma Decade coordinator lacked a full understanding of the issues facing the Roma population, particularly those living in the refugee camp.

¶9. Press coverage of the event was extremely positive and all major newspapers quoted Ambassador's call for greater awareness of the situation of Roma in Montenegro. Subsequent coverage noted that opposition leaders from the Socialist People's Party (SNP) used the International Roma Day event as an opportunity to criticize Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic for a lack of interest in Roma issues, particularly in contrast to the Ambassador's visit to a Roma camp to mark the day.

¶10. COMMENT. Post was encouraged by the active participation of the Roma guests but disappointed by the limited response from government representatives. Despite acceptance of the invitation

by the Ministry of Minorities, they failed to send a representative. It was unclear what next steps would be taken by the Roma Decade coordinator to maximize the 400,000 Euro allocated for implementation of the Action Plan. END COMMENT.  
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